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## Confucianism and democracy

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# confucianism in context

classic philosophy and contemporary issues, east asia and beyond

edited by won suk chang and leah kalmanson

# Confucianism in Context

Classic Philosophy and Contemporary Issues,  
East Asia and Beyond

Edited by  
Wonsuk Chang  
and  
Leah Kalmanson

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Foreword <i>Youngjin Choi</i>	ix
Introduction: The Confucian Tradition—an Evolving Narrative <i>Wonsuk Chang and Leah Kalmanson</i>	1
Chapter 1 Transmitting the <i>Dao</i> : Chinese Confucianism <i>John Berthrong</i>	9
Chapter 2 The History of Confucianism in Korea <i>Youngjin Choi</i>	33
Chapter 3 The History of Confucianism in Japan <i>Peter Nosco</i>	53
Chapter 4 What Is Confucianism? <i>Roger T. Ames</i>	67
Chapter 5 Confucian Person in the Making <i>Wonsuk Chang</i>	87
Chapter 6 Confucianism and Democracy <i>Sor-hoon Tan</i>	103

Chapter 7	
Confucianism and Human Rights	121
<i>Sangjin Han</i>	
Chapter 8	
The Short Happy Life of Boston Confucianism	145
<i>Robert Neville</i>	
Chapter 9	
A Feminist Appropriation of Confucianism	175
<i>Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee</i>	
Chapter 10	
Confucian Trajectories on Environmental Understanding	191
<i>Michael C. Kalton</i>	
Appendix I: List of Names	211
Appendix II: Historical Periods	215
Glossary	219
Bibliography	227
List of Contributors	235
Index	239

# Confucianism and Democracy

*Sor-hoon Tan*

Is Confucianism democratic or antidemocratic? Could Confucianism and democracy at least coexist in a society? Could there be more than coexistence: positive mutual transformation that brings the two closer or even effects a fruitful merger? These are questions of importance beyond the ivory tower. They have consequences for the future of many societies in East Asia, and the relationship between East Asian societies and other societies in a globalizing era. This chapter will begin with a brief introduction to the wide and growing range of literature on the relationship between Confucianism and democracy by highlighting and comparing some major positions. It then advocates a Confucian democracy by reconstructing, in the sense of a transformative understanding that renders past meanings relevant to the future, some key aspects of Confucianism.

## Confucianism and Democracy Are Incompatible

Chen Duxiu, one of the standard bearers of the New Culture movement in Republican China, argued in 1916 that Confucian thought and teachings belonged to the feudal age: its “objectives, ethics, social norms, mode of living, and political institutions did not go beyond the privilege and prestige of a few rulers and aristocrats and had nothing to do with the happiness of the great masses.”<sup>1</sup> Many Chinese intellectuals of the time believed that China’s Confucian heritage was holding back China’s modernization, especially its pursuit of democracy. From the early twentieth century, liberal-minded Korean intellectuals also saw Confucianism as conservative and backward, and attacked it for obstructing modernization, and *minjung* scholars opposing

the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan also regarded Confucianism as an obstacle to the realization of democracy and social justice in South Korea.<sup>2</sup>

Lucian Pye argued that Confucian political culture was authoritarian and an obstacle to democratization in Asia, while Samuel Huntington saw Confucianism and democracy as a “contradiction in terms.”<sup>3</sup> Huntington predicted a “clash of civilization” between the illiberal antidemocratic Islam and Confucianism on the one side and Western liberal democracy on the other. Likewise, some Asians have argued that the values of liberal democracy are incompatible with the Confucian culture of their societies, and they have brought forth Asian values to challenge Western models in the international discourse on human rights.

We need to separate what are merely politically opportunistic positions from serious reflection on the issues. Asian societies have a right to choose or find their own paths, and their specific historical and cultural circumstances may allow and even require them to shape their futures differently from other societies. Even if the price is a loss of democracy, societies with a long historical legacy of Confucian influence may not be better off if that influence is completely destroyed, assuming that it is possible to do so. Even Western scholars are not unanimous in their praise of liberal democratic values. Those who maintain that the values of Confucianism and liberal democracy are inherently incompatible may still believe that they can coexist as “independent value systems” in the same society. Chenyang Li, for example, argues for coexistence of both sets of values, despite their inherent incompatibility, in China’s future.<sup>4</sup>

### Confucianism and Democracy Are Compatible

Asians are also divided about the desirability and validity of liberal democratic values. Among those in favor of liberal democracy, not all believe that it must come at the expense of their Confucian legacy. One could argue that the two most Confucian societies in Asia, Taiwan and South Korea, rank among the most democratic. Kwon Tai-Hwan and Cho Hein’s study of the historical basis of Korean democratization concluded that the Confucian residuals played a dual role in the recent democratization process, and predicted that “in the long run, the Confucian legacy may play an increasingly positive role in the democratization of Korea” through mutual adjustments in the interface between Confucian and western ideals.<sup>5</sup> Japan, which had its share of Confucian influence, is one of the oldest and most stable Asian democracies. However, skeptics might respond that these countries have democratized *despite* Confucianism—in becoming democratic, they become less Confucian.



A strong argument for Confucian democracy would require showing that Confucian values, institutions, and practices are or can be democratic, or at least need not be contradictory to democracy.

The national confidence brought by economic successes of East Asian societies from the 1970s has led to renewed positive interest in their cultural heritage. Confucianism has been credited with the economic boom of the Asian tigers and featured prominently in discussions about the Asian model of development. Even in the People's Republic of China, Deng Xiaoping's reforms allowed a reevaluation of Confucianism, which turned to democratic reconstruction by the mid-eighties. Earlier, Chinese scholars such as Carsun Chang, Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan, and Mou Zongsan advocated "a reconstruction of Chinese culture" that would include reconciling its Confucian heritage with modern democratic aspirations.<sup>6</sup> Prominent Confucian scholars such as Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Wei-ming, have devoted their careers to showing that Confucian philosophy is humanistic and liberal, even though political institutions and practices in Confucian societies historically may have been authoritarian. The less optimistic, Liu Shu-hsien among them, see the compatibility of Confucianism and democracy as requiring significant sacrifices on the part of Confucianism, but without destroying it altogether.

### Denying Essentialism and Democratizing Confucianism

Those who maintain that Confucianism and democracy are inherently incompatible usually adopt the liberal conception of democracy and interpret Confucianism as essentially collectivistic, patriarchal, and authoritarian. However, democracy is a contested concept in Western philosophical discourses, just as Confucianism is not a homogeneous tradition. Those who believe that Confucianism has no place for liberal individual autonomy may nevertheless see Confucianism as compatible with a democracy that adopts a social conception of the individual, such as that found in John Dewey's philosophy. Roger Ames and David Hall have argued that Dewey's "communitarian" conception of democracy is the best bridge between China's Confucian civilization and a democratic future. My earlier work includes an attempt at a Deweyan reconstruction of both Confucianism and democracy for a Confucian democracy.

The position I shall advocate adopts an antiessentialist hermeneutical stance. In my view, Confucianism does not have an unchanging essence; it lies in the meaningful continuity of a tradition of scholarship and social practice, wherein discourses about ideals and norms relate to actual practice in dynamic tension. Even if we grant that Confucianism might not be recognizable without values such as emphasis on the family, filial morality, loyalty, and

respecting tradition, what these values *mean* and how they are actualized could change over time and space. In any case, not everyone agrees that these values represent what is most valuable to Confucianism; they could be seen as variously derived from the primary notions of *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, and *zhi* 知 in contingent social contexts. The Confucian tradition is not homogeneous in content; instead, it is constituted by the continuity of interpretive practice focusing on certain core texts (the inclusion and exclusion of which is also contested). The reconciliation of Confucianism and democracy I shall attempt in this chapter will focus on what I consider the most important of these texts, the *Analects*.<sup>7</sup>

### Deweyan Conception of Democracy

There are many different conceptions of democracy. Democracy could be seen as nothing more than a political system wherein governments are elected for limited terms by universal suffrage. Some argue that popularly elected governments will become mob rule without the rule of law and universal rights limiting government and protecting individual autonomy. Some emphasize the values of liberty and equality, with different weightings between them. Others insist on the need for more comprehensive citizen participation at various levels of the polity, shared values nurturing community life, and civic virtues. The limited space of this chapter does not allow an extensive exploration of the pros and cons of various conceptions. I shall merely set out the basic outline of John Dewey's conception, which will be adopted for my purpose here.

In Dewey's view, democracy is not just a political system of selecting and regulating government; it is an ethical and social ideal. Democracy represents the complete and perfect community. This idea (also ideal) of community is conceived by extracting the desirable characteristics or forms of community life that has actually existed, and using them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement; the ideal is the final limit of all desirable traits and tendencies of community life. Dewey came up with two criteria for existing community life: (1) How numerous and varied are the interests that are consciously shared? (2) How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? Democracy optimizes both criteria.<sup>8</sup> For Dewey, democracy is the only method by which human beings can succeed in "the greatest experiment of humanity—that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable both to a single person and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others."<sup>9</sup>

Rearranging the battle cry of the French Revolution, Dewey placed fraternity before liberty and equality, and insists that all three are meaningless

outside communal life. Liberty as a democratic ideal is understood as “the power to secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others,” and equality is “the unhampered share which individual member of the community has in the consequences of associated action.”<sup>10</sup> Freedom and equality thus understood are important in communication, which is critical to creating and sustaining community. In a community, individual members “hold things in common.” For Dewey, this does not mean that they are clones with homogeneous beliefs and interests, nor does it mean that some “shared values” with mysterious sources should be imposed on them. Rather, what is held in common is achieved over time through communication among those who come together to form a community.

As an idea of community, democracy does not deny importance to the individual. Dewey considers democracy “a personal, an individual, way of life.” “The cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and worth of the individual.” The “idea of democracy as opposed to any conception of aristocracy is that every individual must be consulted in such a way, actively not passively, that he himself becomes a part of the process of authority, of the process of social control; that his needs and wants have a chance to be registered in a way where they count in determining social policy.”<sup>11</sup> Democracy is participative. Democratic politics is constituted by the organization of publics, which are comprised of individuals who are affected by transactions that they are not part of, and who therefore share an interest in controlling those transactions. A democratic public does not organize itself by electing officials through a simple majority vote and leaving them to speak for those they represent, nor is democratic government a matter of following “public opinion” in the sense of an aggregate of the arbitrarily formed views of the majority (or worse, views manipulated by special interests). A public organizes itself democratically through social inquiry, where efficacious communication allows every member the opportunity to change his or her mind after thinking through the issue with other participants in the inquiry. A member of a democracy not only has a right, but a duty to participate in social inquiry.<sup>12</sup>

### *Ren*: Confucian Personal Cultivation and the Making of Community

The list of Confucian virtues begins with *ren* 仁, translated variously as benevolence (Lau), humanity (Wing-tsit Chan), authoritative person or conduct (Ames and Rosemont), or goodness (Watson). The centrality of this concept is clear from the frequency of its appearance in the *Analects*. Confucian scholars through the ages have reaffirmed its importance in individual treatises as well

as the commentaries on the classics. In recent times, Wing-tsit Chan singled out *ren* as the general virtue that encompasses all other Confucian virtues.<sup>13</sup> For Confucius, a person who is not *ren* could not have anything to do with *li* 禮 (ritual) and music, which he values very highly (*Analects* 3.3). *Ren* unites Confucian personal cultivation and community making. It will provide us with an understanding of the Confucian idea of community. By examining this idea, we may ask if Confucian community is antidemocratic in the sense that its members are denied self-government either over their respective lives individually or over the collective.

Confucius taught his students to become exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子). One who abandons *ren* does not deserve the name of *junzi* (*Analects* 4.5). *Ren* is more valuable than life (*Analects* 15.9) because it constitutes true humanity. To be human is to be related to others. As in Dewey's philosophy, the Confucian conception of the self is social. Peter Boodberg suggests that *ren* is best translated as "co-humanity." Tu Wei-ming elaborates the script as "man in society."<sup>14</sup> Personal cultivation, as a process of realizing one's humanity, achieves *ren* through extending and improving one's relationship with significant others. It begins in the family, where one learns to be a filial son and to be brotherly (*Analects* 1.2), extends to the friendships one enters into with others outside the family, leads to one's contribution to sociopolitical order, and ultimately enables a spiritual unity with the cosmos.

The process of personal cultivation is at the same time a process of creating community. The "method of *ren*" is to "establish others in seeking to establish themselves and to promote others in seeking to get there themselves."<sup>15</sup> This is remarkably close to Dewey's idea of democracy as the method for "living together in ways in which the life of each of us is . . . profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others." The answers Confucius gave to the question, "What is *ren*?" include "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want" and "loving others."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Confucian community is sustained by members consciously sharing numerous and varied interests. Constituted by members' ever-expanding relational network, the boundaries of Confucian communities are fluid enough to allow each community full and free interplay with other communities. The Confucian idea of community is compatible with Dewey's conception of democracy as it also optimizes Dewey's two criteria of community life.

When Confucius's favorite student Yan Hui, whom Confucius praised for being more accomplished in *ren* than any other students (*Analects* 6.7), asked about *ren*, Confucius replied, "Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes *ren*" (*keji fuli weiren* 克己復禮為仁).<sup>17</sup> D. C. Lau translates *keji fuli* 克己復禮 as "return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self."<sup>18</sup> Does this imply a subordination of the individual to the collective? Without assuming a self that is an ego existing prior and separate

from relation with others (a conception contrary to Confucian conception of self), we need to answer this question by considering the self-transformation that takes place in the process: is it one of growth or one of oppressed individuality?

The Chinese language uses two terms for “self,” *zi* 自 and *ji* 己. *Zi* is used to express reflexivity. When an act in some other contexts may involve more than one person, *zi* indicates that the speaker is both the source (a related meaning of *zi* is “from”) and the object of the act.<sup>19</sup> *Ji* indicates not only reflexivity, although that is certainly involved, but also emphasizes a contrast with others—I/me *rather than* others. This is not necessarily reprehensible, as Confucius himself says that learning should be for oneself (*ji*) rather than others (*Analects* 14.24). In the *Xunzi*, Confucius is said to grade “self-love” (*ziai* 自愛) above “causing others to love oneself” (*shiren aiji* 使人愛己) and “loving others” (*airen* 愛人) as the answer to the question, “What is *ren*?”<sup>20</sup> In contrasting oneself (*ji*) with another, one is drawing a boundary, however transitory.<sup>21</sup> The superiority of *ziai* lies in achieving a situation where self and others are not divided and opposed, so that loving oneself is at the same time loving others. It is the self-love of one who has attained the greater self constituted by *ren*. In the context of personal cultivation and achieving *ren*, *ji* is the less developed self with more rigid boundaries. Boundaries need to become fluid for growth to take place, for one’s relational network to expand, for one to share others’ concern.

In other words, one overcomes the self or exercises self-discipline (*keji* 克己) when one de-emphasizes the boundaries between oneself and others, and gives one’s own and others’ concerns as much weight as is appropriate to the situation. The explication of *ren* as “overcoming the self” does not imply oppression of individuality; it offers a reconciliation of community with individuality so that individual growth enhances the growth of community and vice versa. “Overcoming the self” or “self-discipline” could also be understood as self-government. At the same time, *ren* is associated with government of others; although everyone should aim to be *ren*, it is especially valued in rulers. Mencius specifically advocated *ren* government. As the virtue of other-directed government, it encompasses compassion and care for others. Such compassion and care require self-discipline so that one does not give one’s own selfish interests greater weight than others’ interests. Only sageliness exceeds *ren* in its “broad generosity towards the people and its ability to help the multitude.”<sup>22</sup>

### Confucian *Li* and Communicative Community

How participatory is Confucian community? While *ren* may accommodate self-government and government over the collective, does it restrict the latter to

a select few? Some may argue that, far from advocating democracy, Confucius advocated an aristocratic community, albeit he favors rule by an aristocracy of virtue instead of any *de facto* aristocracy. It would be anachronistic to attribute the idea of democracy to Confucius. However, even if the concept did not exist within the actual Confucius's intellectual horizons, it does not mean that modern readers today cannot understand *The Analects* in ways that are compatible with democratic thinking. I shall argue that this could be done by understanding Confucian *li*—variously translated as “rites,” “rituals,” “ritual action,” “ceremony,” “propriety,” “decorum,” “manners,” “courtesy,” and “civility”—as a system of symbolic action facilitating what could be democratic communication, rather than rigid rules of behavior entrenching an authoritarian social structure. A community's *li* would then constitute a form of communication that enables its members to hold and value things in common without oppressing individuality.

The early script of *li*, depicting a sacrificial vessel, first signifies religious sacrifices. Later, the term extended to the modes of conducting religious ceremonies, and further to all modes of conduct that were deemed to be proper. *Li* came to be understood as traditional or conventional “rules of conduct.” A. S. Cua, who characterizes *li* as rules of conduct, paraphrases Wittgenstein to elucidate such rules: “[R]itual rules, like all rules, stand there like signposts for the guidance of our will and action.”<sup>23</sup> It is one's sense of what is appropriate for a particular stage of one's journey that provides guidance as to whether, and how, to follow a particular ritual signpost. Although *li*, as David Nivison points out, “are rules that are flexible and humane,” in actual practice, they could degenerate into rigid and oppressive social shackles.<sup>24</sup> Treating *li* as universal and immutable rules is contrary to Confucius's own example of refusing to be inflexible or to insist on certainty (*Analects* 9.4).

Understood as ritual, *li* belongs to a generic kind of social action, similar to greetings, promises, commitments, excuses, pleas, compliments, and pacts, that uses symbolic forms to communicate the actors' intentions and expectations, to elicit certain behavior, and generally to make it possible for human beings to predict one another's actions and coordinate them. Rituals are embodiments of shared meanings. They guide actions so that better coordination can be achieved with less effort than would be possible if one had to search anew for appropriate ways of interacting in every situation. Ritual forms organize social life, enhance efficiency of interaction and provide continuity and stability. Participants in ritual practice communicate with one another, acknowledging their interdependence and reaffirming their mutual trust and commitment to their shared goal.

The communicative capacity of *li* is the source of social harmony. According to Master You, who was said to resemble Confucius, “Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of *li*.”<sup>25</sup> Harmony involves diversity

rather than homogeneity. According to the *Guo Yu*, “There is no music with one note, no culture with one object, no satisfactory results with one flavor.”<sup>26</sup> The *Zuo Zhuan* records an important discourse in which *he* 和, as harmony in the sense of a minister’s views complementing the views of his ruler, is distinguished from *tong* 通, the minister and ruler having identical views. It explicates harmony with the metaphor of making broth from various ingredients, which is described in the *Lüshi chunqiu*: “[T]he business of mixing and blending must use the sour, the sweet, the bitter, the spicy and the salty. Bringing the ingredients together is a very subtle art, each has its own expression.”<sup>27</sup> A harmonious community does not suppress the individuality of its members; instead, it flourishes only when individuality and harmony enhance each other.

A Confucian community is participatory because successful *li* requires every participant’s personal investment of meaning in the performance, in other words, *li* must be accompanied by *yi* 義, or appropriateness.<sup>28</sup> *Li* fulfils its function only when each and every participant is able to appropriate the ritual forms and render them meaningful for himself or herself, and thereby to communicate efficaciously and act in harmony with fellow participants. *Li* represents the cultural legacy that transmits meanings created by one generation to future generations; *yi* is each individual’s personal appropriation of this legacy and her contribution of novel meaning to it, based on her interaction with her particular environment in each specific situation. *Yi* is developed and transmitted in *li* (*Analects* 15.18). Participants in *li* come to share meanings and norms of appropriateness (*yi*), which constitute the community’s moral values. Therefore, it is through *li* that one cultivates oneself: one develops a sense of *yi*, which is the basic disposition of the exemplary person (*junzi*), through *li*. The mutual enhancement of *li* and *yi* contributes to *ren* in both personal and communal cultivation.

Although *li* is not coercive, it is critical to self-discipline, that is, self-government. *Li* provides the forms through which one governs one’s own emotions, thoughts, and actions. The sense of *yi* developed in ritual participation transforms our ways of feeling and thinking, especially in relation to others. Acting contrary to those ways of feeling and thinking engenders a sense of shame, which discourages us from transgressing.<sup>29</sup> This is why Confucius believed *li* to be crucial to sociopolitical order.

The Master said, “Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng*) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing*), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de*) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li*) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover will order themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the governments that have appropriated Confucianism through the ages have ignored this important distinction between government by *li* and government by penal law (*xing* 刑) in coercively imposing a ritual order enforced by indoctrination and punishments. Participative self-transformation is replaced by coerced compliance. Dynamic and creative order that emerges from participative performance is replaced by stagnant passivity. Critics of Confucianism have been justifiably hostile to dogmatic Confucian ritual teachings and practice (*lijiao* 禮教), which Lu Xun famously condemned as “cannibalistic” in his *Diary of a Mad Man*. However, these pernicious practices that destroy individuality in the name of community should be seen as perversions resulting from a loss of the flexibility and appropriateness that should be part of ideal ritual practice.

### Equality and Confucian Differentiated Order

If governments should lead with excellence, then those with excellence should rule. Does this mean that Confucianism advocates an elitist government, a hierarchical social order, contrary to the democratic value of equality? Equality, however, does not translate into a “one-size-fits-all” kind of extreme egalitarianism; even if such a society is possible, its desirability is doubtful. Western democratic theory is mainly concerned that only *relevant* differences should be allowed to affect social distribution and rewards. For example, race, gender, age, or lineage should not be allowed to undermine equality before the law and equality of opportunity, which are usually considered part of democratic society. However, unequal wages are justifiable if the jobs require different effort and qualifications; it would not be undemocratic to give limited places in a university to those who perform better in entrance exams appropriate to the course of study.

The fact that people are treated differently need not be contrary to democracy. Equality is an essentially contested value in Western thought. Dewey’s understanding of equality as “unhampered share in the consequences of associations” does not require absolute equality in terms of identical quantities. Instead, it allows for functional differentiation and quantitatively different distribution of resources, and different levels and kinds of participation based on different needs and capacities relevant to specific situations. I shall try to show that Confucian social order is differentiated without necessarily being hierarchical and that its justification for inequalities is not undemocratic but compatible with Dewey’s conception of equality as distribution based on needs and capacities contributing to personal-communal growth.

Distinction between superior and inferior, between better and worse, different social statuses and unequal power is part of the differentiation required in a Confucian community. However, inequality need not be so



totalistic that if one is superior, one is superior always and in all things; it need not be so inflexible that one is born into a fixed place in a rigid social order and must live one's life as prescribed by one's position with no possibility of change. Inequality and equality in the differentiated order of a Confucian community are relative rather than absolute. Such a community distributes respect, power, goods, and services *proportional* to the degree each individual meets the criteria ethically relevant to what is to be distributed. In a Confucian differentiated order, there is no permanent elite who enjoys more of everything at the expense of the rest of the people.

In Confucius's view, a good ruler of a state or head of a household "does not worry that his people are poor, but that wealth is inequitably distributed (*bujun*)."<sup>31</sup> Other translations of *bujun* 不均 include "inequality," "ill-apportioned," and "uneven distribution." It is highly unlikely that Confucius would recommend the same quantity for all, more likely that the shares should be proportional to some ethically acceptable criteria. One such criterion is need since, "Exemplary persons help out the needy; they do not make the rich richer."<sup>32</sup> The responsibility of a government is to satisfy its people's material and educational needs (*Analects* 12.7). Confucius disapproves of the extravagance of the powerful at the expense of others (*Analects* 12.9). He went so far as to disown his student Ranyou for adding to the coffers of the House of Ji, which was already richer than the Duke of Zhou (*Analects* 11.17).

In Confucianism, political participation is justified by abilities. Regarding the question, "Who should govern?" Confucius is seen as replacing an aristocracy of birth with a meritocracy of ethical achievement. Only one with the abilities to discharge the responsibilities of a position should be allowed to occupy it (*Analects* 4.14, 13.2, 15.14). Democratizing Confucianism will require recognizing that participation itself is educational. Meritocracy is compatible with equality if everyone has a chance of rising to the highest office. If a society historically has been rigidly stratified, the language of meritocracy fosters elitist tendencies that, more often than not, underestimate both the needs and the abilities of those in the lower social strata. In contrast, the language of democracy, by nurturing a public ethos that explicitly rejects historical social stratifications and by requiring that any inequalities be justified rather than taking them for granted, is more favorable to participation by those from lower social strata. To compensate for its pernicious historical associations, Confucian democracy would have to be more self-consciously critical of existing inequalities to ensure that only those fulfilling its philosophical ethical standards are permitted; it must also avoid going to the opposite extreme of adopting a hostile attitude toward all inequalities, even deference to excellence.

For a social order to be differentiated rather than hierarchical there should be no entrenched social inequalities. Not only must distribution and participation be based on needs and abilities, but as needs and abilities change

so must the distribution and participation. Any judgment of superior and inferior must be specific to a situation. It is meaningless to ask if a person is superior or inferior without specifying superior and inferior in *what*? A superior business executive may be an inferior parent. Someone superior to you in calligraphy now may become inferior later if you improve your skill more rapidly than she. Empirically, superiority in one area is sometimes related to superiority in other areas. But this should be determined through empirical investigation, not asserted as some kind of a priori truth. Moreover, such relations are always contingent and subject to change. A person's superiority in a specific area justifies her having more of some resources or goods only if such distribution contributes to growth, such as talent in sports and admission to a sports college. There is no superiority that justifies a higher entitlement to all resources and goods.

In a Confucian differentiated order, the distribution of political power and social prestige, though based on merit, is not a reward for abilities. The more capable does not therefore deserve more. One's position only entitles one to what is required to discharge one's responsibilities. Ritual forms of deference toward those in superior positions, for example, are not simply for the superior's personal gratification, but have the communicative function of recognizing the authority of those positions and thereby subjecting the occupants to evaluation by making them more visible to others. One would be less concerned about how much better one's boss is if one were not expected to show deference. The greater the deference shown to an individual, the higher the standard she is expected to meet. In terms of material goods, those in higher positions are not automatically entitled to more by virtue of their position. What is sufficient for the people should be sufficient for the ruler (*Analects* 12.9).

"From Seventy, I Could Give my Heart-and-Mind Free Rein . . ."

Besides equality, freedom is also important to a democratic community. Isaiah Berlin distinguishes between two concepts of liberty.<sup>33</sup> Negative liberty answers the question, "What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference from other persons?" Positive liberty is concerned with "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?"<sup>34</sup> Although Dewey (who died before Berlin published that essay) would not have rejected negative liberty, he would have considered it inadequate; his understanding of freedom leans toward positive liberty. Dewey understands freedom as "the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits

of association.”<sup>35</sup> Freedom must be reconciled with the promotion of the common good in a democracy. At the same time, it is closely related to a person’s growth and intelligence because “[w]hat men actually cherish under the name of freedom is that power of varied and flexible growth, of change of disposition and character, that springs from intelligent choice.”<sup>36</sup>

Scholars have also argued that if there is any concept of liberty in Confucian thought, it would be closer to positive liberty. I shall try to show what kind of freedom may be found in the teachings of *The Analects*, and defend it against Berlin’s criticism of positive liberty. In *The Analects*, we do not find any single term that could be translated as “freedom.” However, is Confucius not claiming a kind of freedom when he tells us that “from seventy, I could give my heart-and-mind [*xin* 心] free rein without overstepping the boundaries?”<sup>37</sup> This freedom is achieved only after a long and arduous process of cultivating the person, in which the person or self, far from being fixed and given, changes for the better over time. There is also freedom in “setting his heart-and-mind on learning” when he chose and committed himself to the path, but relatively less in scope and quality than the freedom he achieved from seventy. Freedom is a relative concept for Confucius. As a person successfully cultivates himself and grows ethically, his freedom increases.

In his criticism of positive freedom, Berlin identifies a strand of it as “self-abnegation in order to attain independence.”<sup>38</sup> To avoid being crushed by external constraints, be they laws or accidents of nature, deliberate malice of others or unintentional effect of their acts and human institutions, one liberates oneself from desires that one cannot realize. This is the freedom of Epictetus who claims that he, a slave, is freer than his master. This conception of freedom aids authoritarianism by relocating the problem from others imposing constraints—whether they are justified—to the agent herself. It is only the agent, not the world, who must change if she is to be free. Is Confucius’s freedom such a case of “internalizing” external constraints—is he a man who grew to love his chains?

Although some later Confucians adopted a repressive attitude toward human desires, Confucius does not reject desire totally; rather, he speaks of “desiring authoritative conduct” (*Analects* 7.30). However, he praised one Meng Gongchuo for “not desiring.” (*Analects* 14.12). In the absence of an absolute opposition between desires and ethical conduct, what matters is the distinction between ethical desires and unethical ones. One should liberate oneself from greed, from any kind of *excesses* in gratifying one’s own physical appetites, which is unethical. Avoiding such unethical desires would re-channel one’s energy into ethical desires. A closer look at the use of *buyu* 不欲 or “not desiring” in *The Analects* itself substantiates this. Confucius considered Meng Gongchuo qualified to be household steward to the Zhao or Wei families (*Analects* 14.11). A greedy man in such a position would easily succumb to

corruption or misappropriation. Meng Gongchuo was eminently qualified for that post because he was “free from [excessive] desires,” in other words, he was not greedy. Another instance where *buyu* is understood as the lack of greed is in the case of Master Jikang, whose family was “richer than the Duke of Zhou,” worrying about thieves. Confucius said to him, “If you yourself were not so greedy (*buyu*), the people could not be paid to steal.”<sup>39</sup> Master Jikang’s greed was at the expense of the people, making them so poor and desperate that they resorted to theft.

Confucius’s freedom is not self-abnegation in the sense of getting rid of all desires. Contrary to the self-abnegation Berlin criticizes, a Confucian liberates herself from some desires not because she *cannot* realize them, but because she *should not* realize them. In the former, “internalization” takes place regardless of the ethical nature of the external constraints. In the latter, the ethical or unethical nature of the constraints is of paramount importance to one’s action. While it involves evaluating desires and avoiding some in favor of others, Confucius’s freedom is not a case of “reducing the area of one’s vulnerability” to external factors. The “pruning” of desires, instead of stultifying oneself, would help one grow better. It is an open question whether that reduces or increases one’s vulnerability to the world. Confucius does not see the world as completely within one’s control, even if one is a sage. It is quite possible to find more of one’s desires frustrated with greater positive freedom; being able to follow one’s desires without overstepping the boundaries is no guarantee that those desires will be fulfilled. In a degenerate world, when the way does not prevail, it might be easier to gratify unethical desires than fulfill ethical ones (consider the frustration of Confucius’s desire to bring good government to the world).

The boundaries that Confucius from seventy no longer overstepped are those between ethical and unethical desires. They are the boundaries of the Confucian way of ethical living (*dao* 道). The way is not a fixed standard of conduct, a perfectionist ideal. It is something that emerges from one’s personal experience, albeit an experience which always involves others with whom we interact; it cannot bring ethical success if imposed from without. “Becoming authoritative in one’s conduct [that is, personal cultivation] is self-originating, how could it originate with others?”<sup>40</sup> “It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person.”<sup>41</sup> Such “emergence” of the *dao* requires an organic integration of one’s actions with the rest of one’s experience, which precludes coercion as a means. Coercion results only in external compliance. One may force another to follow a way, but such compliance does not guarantee understanding; the other person cannot be coerced into “realizing it” (*Analects* 8.9). An argument can be made that *zhi* 知 is not merely knowing intellectually, but requires knowing in practice, or implies *knowing how*. It is “to realize” in both senses of “coming to know”

and “making real.” Realizing a Confucian way requires integrating it with one’s experience through learning and reflecting. Confucian freedom lies in realizing a way, not in merely following one—it cannot be forced.

### Democratic Participation and “Realizing the Way”

The distinction between “realizing the way” and merely following it is crucial in steering Confucianism away from an elitist meritocracy toward democracy. It opens up the possibility of asserting the educational nature of participation. To realize the way, to know what to do in various situations, one must learn. Learning is a social activity, so that the capacity to contribute to political order is best developed in political participation. One could reconstruct Confucian learning as participation in social inquiry.

The *Analects* is a collection of conversations, questions, and answers between Confucius, his students, and others. They are records of social inquiries in which everybody participates according to their abilities rather than one-directional transmission of knowledge, as witnessed in the reciprocity between learning and teaching. Learning is social in the way it is carried out, as a cooperative activity involving a group rather than as a solitary endeavor. For Confucius, knowledge and wisdom are best gained in community, among people who are *ren* (*Analects* 4.1). Learning is also social in its consequences. Confucian inquiry would aim at the cultivation of persons in community; when effective, it changes a community through changing its members and their relations with one another. The wise devote themselves to what is appropriate for the people; they contribute to people’s personal cultivation by promoting those upright in their conduct to serve as examples to others (*Analects* 6.22, 12.22).

Social inquiry arises when people encounter problems. Contrary to the common belief that Confucian education is book learning by rote, Confucius teaches his students the importance of learning from the problems encountered and not repeating one’s mistakes (*Analects* 1.8, 9.25, 15.30, 16.9). Puzzling over practical problems is what drives learning. As a teacher, Confucius admits that there is nothing he could do for someone who is not constantly asking herself, “What to do? What to do?” (*Analects* 15.16). Confucius advocates “learning much, selecting out of it what works well, and then following it” (*Analects* 7.28). Even his interest in ancient texts is pragmatic: Both the *Book of Songs* and the *Books of Rites* should be studied because they enable people to interact better, and to contribute to the community in various ways (*Analects* 13.5, 16.3, 17.9). In learning, as social inquiry, we seek the answers to “What to do?” in problematic situations. Finding those answers means knowing our way, or realizing the way (*zhidao* 知道). Just as becoming *ren* begins with oneself,

learning and realizing the way requires personal participation in solving the common problems of the community. To realize the way rather than merely follow it, there must be democratic participation in social inquiry to solve the shared problems of the community.

I have attempted to re-create Confucius's learning and teaching in democratic ways by showing how individuality and community can be reconciled, how Confucian *li*, far from being rigid rules of behavior entrenching social hierarchy, enables people to hold things in common and achieve harmony through communication, how Confucian meritocracy is compatible with a Deweyan conception of equality, how the Confucian way of life is positively free through and in its ethical quest, and how realizing the Confucian way requires participatory learning. This attempt describes what is possible and desirable rather than any actual Confucian community. It offers an idea of Confucian democracy that would hopefully guide the actions of those who would like to be both Confucian and democratic; the greater achievement would be to persuade others that a democratic Confucianism is the best option for Confucians in the modern world, and that a Confucian democracy is more satisfactory than other kinds of democracy in some ways, at least for societies that value their Confucian legacy. This is a project for another day.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

Sor-hoon Tan (2004), *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* has more extensive discussions of a Deweyan reconstruction of Confucian Democracy; Roger Ames and David Hall's (1999), *Democracy of the Dead* also discusses John Dewey's concept of democracy and Confucianism in the context of China's future. An interesting proposal for "democracy with Confucian characteristics" is presented in Daniel A. Bell (2006), *Beyond Liberal Democracy*. A special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (vol. 34, no. 2, June 2007) is devoted to the theme of "Democracy and Chinese Philosophy" with heavy emphasis on Confucianism. Many people interested in the compatibility of democracy and Confucianism are concerned about the issues surrounding human rights. Good discussions on this could be found in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel Bell, eds. (1999), *East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*; Wm. Theodore de Bary (1998), *Asian Values and Human Rights*; de Bary and Tu Weiming, eds. (1998), *Confucianism and Human Rights*. Other examples dealing with the relevance of Confucianism to the modern world, including its compatibility with various aspects of democratic life include Daniel Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds. (2003), *Confucianism for the Modern World*.

## Notes

1. Chen Duxiu (1960), 2:153–56.
2. John Duncan (2002), 37–38.
3. Lucian Pye (1985), 55–89; Samuel Huntington (1996), 21.
4. Chenyang Li (1999), 172–89.
5. Kwon Tai-Hwan and Cho Hein (1997), 321–338. See also, Duncan (2002), 40.
6. Carsun Chang et al. (1958), 455–83.
7. Quotations from the *Analects* will be cited in the notes. References to ideas and themes in the *Analects* will be cited in the text, for the readers' convenience.
8. On constructing social ideals, see John Dewey (1916), 89 and Dewey (1927), 286–87, 328.
9. Dewey (1938), 303.
10. Dewey (1927), 329.
11. Dewey (1939), 226; Dewey (1938), 295, 303.
12. Dewey (1927), 345–50.
13. Wing-tsit Chan (1955), 4:295–319.
14. Peter Boodberg (1953), 2:317–32; Tu Weiming (1979):18.
15. *Analects* 6.30. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from *The Analects* are from Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. (1998).
16. *Analects* 12.2 and 12.22.
17. *Analects* 12.1.
18. D. C. Lau (1979), 112.
19. The graph for *zi* begins as a pictogram showing a human nose; pointing to one's nose is a way of self-reference. Edoardo Fazzioli (1986), 29; Leon Wieger (1965), 325. It is also used as an emphatic pronoun: "I myself did it" in contrast with the reflexive use, "I did it to myself"
20. *Xunzi* 29/143/8. See the translation in John Knoblock (1994), Vol. 3.
21. This implied sense of drawing boundaries is supported by the gloss of *ji* in the *Shuowen jiezi* as "having definite shape or form" and "the warp and weft of a loom" indicating an organized structure. Xu Shen (1966), *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 748/14b:21A.
22. *Analects* 6.30.
23. A. S. Cua (1983), 13; Cua (1985), 98.
24. David S. Nivison (1966), 47, 67.
25. *Analects* 1.12.
26. *A Concordance to the Kuo-yu* (1973), 11679–82.
27. Author's translation. For alternate translations see *The Chinese Classics* (1970), 5:679, 684; and Lau (1994) 14.2/71/19.
28. For an interpretation of *yi* as the personal investment of meaning in action, based on the interaction between a person's individuality and her environment in specific situations, see Ames and David Hall (1987), 89–110.
29. Mencius (2A6) saw the "heart of shame" as the "sprout of *yi*," although he used a different term, *xiuwu*, instead of *chi*, they are close enough in meaning for both to be translated as "shame."

30. *Analects* 2.3.
31. *Analects* 16.1.
32. *Analects* 6.4.
33. Isaiah Berlin (1969), 135–41.
34. *Ibid.*, 121–22.
35. Dewey (1927), 329; Dewey (1928), 111.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Analects* 2.4.
38. Berlin (1969): 121–22.
39. *Analects* 12.18.
40. *Analects* 12.1.
41. *Analects* 15.29.